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ABSTRACT

The economic theory of social exchange has some serious shortcomings when applied to minorities--especially the disabled. First, it assumes dyads comprise the basic unit where exchange occurs and that rewards and costs must occur at that level. Second, the model standardizes the experience of white, Western European and American males. The model has a built-in justification for exploitation of relationships just as the capitalistic economy that inspired the model justifies exploitation of individuals on the fiction that all people start out equal; therefore any advantage one can gain over the other is legitimate. As a minority without physical, social, or political power, the disabled are at a distinct disadvantage in a competitive society. The general assumption is that handicapped persons are only marginally capable of competing successfully in a capitalistic economy and are therefore only marginally capable of competing socially. The ideology expressed through social-exchange theory is that the disabled are different, and different always means inferior. Disabled people should instead try to see their social relationships in a group-centered model rather than in the strictly dyadic, competitive exchange model. This communal model has three advantages: (1) it allows the disabled person to contribute something to the whole system; (2) the services and support that the disabled person needs do not fall all on one person; and (3) the communal reality becomes the strongest element in all of the relationships within the group. (MS)

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Handicapping Social Exchange Theory

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In a recent TV movie entitled Just the Way You Are, Christy McNichols plays a single young woman with a mild disability--a short brace on one leg that causes a slight limp--certainly nothing a seriously disabled person would call a real handicap. She is pursuing a career as a professional flutist. Her parents, of course, are somewhat overprotective while trying to respect her independence. She is engaged to a "very nice boy" she isn't sure she wants to marry. On a trip to Europe, she sees in a store window some ski clothes modeled by a mannequin with a short cast on one leg. She goes to a doctor, has a cast put on her bad leg, and makes reservations to spend a week at a ski resort. The plot is very predictable: she falls in love and rather than tell her lover the truth, leaves him. Later, he spies her in a train station wearing her brace, and they live happily ever after.

I suspect that no one who watched the movie thought the story especially weird. After all, why shouldn't the woman want to experience "normal" social relationships, however temporarily? The pervasive social attitude that makes this movie credible is that physically abnormal people are expected to have socially abnormal relationships. Never mind personality, intelligence, sensitivity, and wit. Physical deviance very nearly mandates social deviance.

Doubtless, many aspects of our culture encourage the general association of physical handicap with social inferiority, but this paper will elaborate on just one, the economic theory of social exchange. Since it was introduced thirty years ago, this

model, based on the ideas of a capitalistic economy, has become the standard one for explaining why human beings initiate and maintain social relationships. The model posits four rewards for dyadic interactions: money, goods, services, and sentiment. Those are the paybacks that keep us in relationships. When our profit margin becomes too thin, we break off that relationship. Each dyad is seen as a small closed system required to sustain itself without outside influence.

The theory has some serious shortcomings when applied to minorities--especially the disabled. First, it assumes dyads comprise the basic unit where exchange occurs and that rewards and costs must occur at that level. Second, the model standardizes the experience of white, Western European and American males. Its emphasis is on dyadic competition, as in boxing, wrestling, tennis, and other two-person sports. Thus, its orientation is toward power: who has it, who keeps it, who's after it in the relationship. The assumption is that people who live in relationships where they are constantly losing are satisfied, or they would leave the relationship. The model has a built-in justification for exploitation of relationships just as the capitalistic economy that inspired the model justifies exploitation of individuals on the fiction that all people start out equal, therefore any advantage one can gain over the other is legitimate.

It is certainly true that a metaphor is not totally applicable between tenor and vehicle; however, the metaphors we

choose to describe phenomena are reflective of our attitude toward them. (See Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, for a discussion of debate in terms of war metaphors.) A metaphor as influential and pervasive as social exchange theory is bound to carry some of its competitive atmosphere from economics to interpersonal relationships and encourage people to see their relationships in unnecessarily competitive terms. Ridley and Avery (1979) show extensive use of the attitude.

As a minority without physical, social, or political power, the disabled are at a distinct disadvantage in a competitive society. The general assumption is that handicapped are only marginally capable of competing successfully in a capitalistic economy and are therefore only marginally capable of competing socially. That's the message the young disabled woman in the movie was desperately trying to deny: "I am not socially deficient because I limp."

People who choose to see their human relationships in less competitive terms are labeled deviant. The ideology expressed through social-exchange theory is that the disabled are different, and different always means inferior. Thus, social-exchange theory does the handicapped community a real disservice. It perpetuates the ethic of individual exploitation that it proffers as the normal standard. People who participate marginally are deviants. To support this position, I shall examine briefly two of the four rewards exchange theory posits as the only ones available in any interaction, services and

sentiment. An alternative model, one a little kinder to the disabled minority will then be suggested.

The most satisfactory relationships are said to be those in which both participants pay primarily in the same coin--money for money, goods for goods, services for services, and sentiment for sentiment. As we shall see, this becomes problematic for disabled people.

Services are a unique reward system in that they involve an exchange of activities. To what extent can the disabled exchange services with the ablebodied? Often, of course, the disabled must accept many more services than they ever can repay in kind, leaving them with the constant feeling of being beholden. The person offering the service holds the balance of power in the relationship. As Thibaut and Kelley point out in their construct of "fate control," one person has power over another and can "allocate rewards to himself, irrespective of the choice of action by the other" (Chadwick-Jones, 1976:34). The powerful person can alter behavior to give some rewards to the other as long as the powerful person's long-term goals are being met (Chadwick-Jones, 1976). Though admittedly unequal, exchange theory assumes the relationships are voluntary; the person controlled always has an out if s/he wants it. That's an overly idealistic position since we all know disabled people's choices are often severely limited. The disabled would be included in a category Thibauat and Kelley call coercive relationships, which also includes prisoners and military personnel. These are

situations in which the less powerful have few, if any, alternatives. Restricted choices are especially evident in rehabilitation hospitals (Gellman in Stubbins, 1977); for--as with prisoners--very few decisions about treatment are made by the disabled themselves.

Altruism is a reward system associated with services characterized by self-reward rather than other-reward. Homans recognized the phenomenon but saw no problems in reconciling it with his theory. He saw social profit in altruism and once wrote, "I've seen too many altruists getting absolute personal pleasure out of altruism" (Chadwick-Jones, 1976:158). Asch also sees that altruism provides an egocentric gratification (Chadwick-Jones, 1976).

What is there about altruism as a reward system that makes the word anathema to the disabled? In most interactions--even some coercive ones--the receiver of the service has some control over the extent of the reward to the provider of the service; in fact, exchange theory insists that rewards/costs are immediate and bestowed by the dyad members on each other. Not so for altruism. If altruism is the profit sought, the reward is not controlled by the person for whom the service is rendered. The altruistic person is the powerful one who controls his/her own reward by manipulating the disabled. If the altruistic person values mainly the community prestige or the feeling of self-esteem that his/her deed provides, the disabled cannot influence the reward at all. The service provider gains social profit from

a source other than the person helped. Thus altruists can reward themselves, and sometimes the more the disabled one tries to deny the altruist a reward, the more the altruist feels rewarded. The helped are merely objects manipulated by altruists for the benefit of their own self- esteem. To use one of Homans' own terms, in an altruistic situation, "fair exchange" is not possible (Chadwick-Jones, 1976). Perhaps the phenomenon can be seen more clearly if summed up in the old saying, "A man is never so tall as when he stoops to help a child." Indeed, the disabled are sometimes treated as children.

In a non-altruistic exchange, Weinstein, DeVaughn & Wiley (1969) found that those who contributed more than their "fair share" to a dyadic project were repaid by the other member's deference (if they were friends) and by extra effort and leadership (if they were strangers): "A fair repayment of the obligation implies equality of status. Conversely, the failure to provide a fair return of obligation implies social inferiority" (Weinstein, DeVaughn & Wiley, 1969:1). Altruism falls outside the bounds of this balance or reciprocity that is a common demominator in various social-exchange theories (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Homans, 1950; Blau, 1964). By definition, the debt cannot be repaid. If the disabled person in a friendship dyad is kept constantly on the receiving end of favors, s/he is kept constantly in a deference position. Self- esteem cannot take that kind of one-way giving for long. Sooner or later the deferent person runs short of self-esteem. Wiley (1969) found

that self-esteem and deference are related in that the person with greater self-esteem can afford to give more of it away as deference. Handicapped people, who generally have a short supply to begin with, are the ones required to pay.

Sentiment is the fourth area of rewards in traditional social-exchange theory. Here, the physically disabled are more able to participate; however, strain on the relationship is created when the disabled feel they must repay services with sentiment too often. Since relationships are the most balanced where the mutual rewards are in the same category, this reward exchange promises some problems. We've just seen what can happen when the service of altruism is repaid with the sentiment of deference. The situation resembles altruism to a degree, for even though the disabled is offering a reward, it may be a forced one that compromises the disabled person's integrity. That's the equivalent of being bought, and self-esteem suffers even more. In some cases, notably autism, the disabled may not be able to repay with sentiment. In a recent movie, Rain Man, Dustin Hoffman plays the autistic older brother of Tom Cruise. Though Tom actively seeks his brother's affection, there are only brief moments of connection. Instead, Dustin rewards Tom with money earned playing blackjack.

In long-standing relationships between abled and disabled people, sentiment is often a mutually satisfying reward to both parties. In the initiating stage of relationships, however, a disabled person often mistrusts an able person's motives and is

overly suspicious of the sentiment of pity. Sometimes, the disabled go to great lengths to assure themselves they are not being pitied, as Christy McNichol did in the movie mentioned earlier. Pity is so feared by the disabled that often the mere possibility of its occurrence forestalls any self-disclosure that might propel the relationship to the next stage of intimacy.

Though to a limited extent, group behavior is addressed in social-exchange theory, the group itself is treated as a single entity, thus preserving the basic dyadic relationship (Chadwick-Jones, 1970:40). However, humans do not relate merely in dyads, perhaps not even primarily in dyads. Social systems play a significant role in human relationships that exchange theory does not address. We are members of families, professional organizations, social groups, civic committees, unions, self-help groups, neighborhoods, communities, and the like. These groups have strong effects on us, and much of our social satisfaction is a result not so much of dyadic interaction but feedback that results from all the various interactions within a larger group. A group is more capable of absorbing every member's non-contributing idiosyncracies while feeding back some of each member's strengths to all. Within the context of a group model, every dyadic relationship has an impact beyond any two people in direct communication.

For example, let's assume that in a family of five, one of the children becomes a paraplegic in an accident. Finally home from the hospital after many months, the child is lonely,

depressed, irritable, demanding, and unwilling to make friends. You think the relationships among other members of the family are not affected by this child's situation? How long can Mom and Dad keep their own energy from flagging in the face of such a constant emotional drain? When do they start yelling at the other kids? At each other? When do the kids start avoiding the disabled one? Now let's assume there is a child next door who shows some signs of being interested in interacting with the disabled child. The parents contribute to the budding relationship by creating opportunities for them to be together and by providing transportation to activities they want to share. If those children develop a friendship so that the disabled child's self-esteem improves, wouldn't the relationships within the entire family improve?

Certainly, at some level, exchange between the two prospective friends takes place, that risks are taken in order to self-disclose, that self-esteem is threatened just as it is in the formation of all intimate relationships. But exchange theory discourages us from visualizing any broader social networks. It assumes no payback beyond what individuals can confer on each other.

Interpersonal relationships may be more group related and less dyadic than we think. Just as there are economies other than the capitalism that undergirds social-exchange theory, there are also alternative social models. Imagine for a moment a communal model of communication as the norm, with those who would

exploit it for private gain designated as deviants. Communal theories of human symbolic behavior are not without precedent. Confucius said we become better people in order to contribute more to the public welfare. More recently, the sociologist Parsons has proposed a communal concept of communication in his systems theory. Pecheux refers to the "illusion of autonomy" (Chadwick-Jones, 1970:399).

I propose that disabled people try to see their social relationships in a group-centered model rather than in the strictly dyadic, competitive exchange model, specifically a wagon wheel. The group would be the hub. Spokes from the hub run to the individual members, who are connected with each other by the rim. Occasional broken spokes don't prevent the wheel's turning, though they do affect its efficiency. Repair is always possible, and--unlike the dyadic model--doesn't depend solely on the good will of the immediate dyad to occur.

A communal model has at least three advantages over the traditional dyadic, economic one. First, it allows the disabled person to contribute something to the whole system. Systems require greater variety of support than individuals often do. If a disabled person is highly skilled in interpreting and responding to others' emotional states, s/he isn't going to be able to pay back a friend who receives enough emotional support from a spouse. But in a larger context, the disabled's ability may help to ease other relationships within the task or social group to which they both belong.

Second, the services and support that the disabled person needs do not fall all on one person. Strong-arm lifting, emotional support, or intellectual help can come from those individuals within the group with an excess of those skills who share their expertise. Contributions and needs of all who share the system create a new reality--one that did not exist before the system came into being and will not exist after the system disintegrates. No one in the system is free of its influence, and everyone in the system contributes to the definition of that reality whether s/he wishes to or not.

Third, the communal reality becomes the strongest element in all the group's relationships. It can absorb more of everyone's shortcomings and promote more of everyone's assets without itself being destroyed. Since the communal model is not competitive, it provides the nurtured and nurturing core that sustains all the participants.

A good TV example of what I'm talking about is Benny Stulwitz on LA Law. Benny, mildly retarded, saves the firm money by being its courier and earns money for himself. That's the physical, economic--even capitalistic--situation. Interpersonally, Benny relates to everyone in the office, more so with some than others. Over the various episodes, however, he has supported others as well as drawn support from them, and no single person serves as his full-time smothering guardian. By contrast, when Christy McNichol goes off alone to the Alps in her cast, she is setting herself squarely in the traditional social

exchange model: a dyadic relationship where she feels compelled to hide her "deviance."

The benefits of this community model for disabled people is that individual differences are more readily absorbed into a group. It values their contributions and offers them support without requiring so many feelings of inferiority, without the self-definition of deviance.

The dyadic, social-exchange model is so pervasive that to resist its influence requires conscious effort and some imagination. But if disabled people can see their relationships primarily in group systems rather than confined to dyads, they may feel their individual value enhanced by greater social reciprocity and more self-esteem.

A new model of communication theory will not make--miraculously--all handicapped relationships easy. The prejudice and inferior feelings are not that easily assuaged. But in addition to all other physical problems, the physically handicapped are not forced to envision themselves as also deviant in their social relationships. A communal model serves their interests more directly and encourages a fuller participation in society by the disabled than does the traditional economic model.

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